The New Mexico Department of Health will soon identify in its coronavirus vaccination invitations which vaccine a person will receive, and most experts urge people to accept any of the three.

“Please get a vaccine as soon as you are eligible,” the Health Department said Friday. “It could save your life.”

The matter is considered pertinent because some Catholics and evangelical Christians have discouraged use of the new Johnson & Johnson vaccine. They have questioned the morality of Johnson & Johnson’s use many years ago of fetal cell lines derived from abortions.

Archbishop John C. Wester of the Archdiocese of Santa Fe said this week that the availability of the new Johnson & Johnson vaccine is encouraging. That vaccine requires only one dose, while the Moderna and Pfizer vaccines call for two, making the Johnson & Johnson inoculation more convenient for rural New Mexicans, he said.

Using the Johnson & Johnson vaccine is fine, Wester said, because it moves the country closer to widespread immunity and promotes “protection of human life.” It is “entirely morally acceptable” to receive the one-dose Johnson & Johnson vaccine or the two-dose Pfizer and Moderna vaccines, he said.
Catholic leaders in St. Louis, New Orleans and other places have decried the ethics and morality of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine.

Pfizer and Moderna used fetal cell lines in some of the testing of their vaccines, but Johnson & Johnson used them to help produce its vaccine. Regardless, the cell lines used in either testing or production are from abortions that took place decades ago.

The cells continue multiplying in laboratories and are long removed from the original fetal cell. *Science* magazine reported that cell lines have been used since the 1960s to make vaccines against rubella and other diseases.

Most medical officials and organizations encourage getting the Johnson & Johnson vaccine if it’s the one available.

“These cell lines are literally thousands of generations removed from when they originated,” said Daniel Derksen, a family physician and director of the University of Arizona Center for Rural Health. “There’s no tissue from a fetus. They’re not the same as aborted fetal tissue.”

Derksen said the Johnson & Johnson vaccine has less stringent refrigeration requirements than the two others and “really helps states like New Mexico and Arizona,” with vast rural areas.

The New Mexico Department of Health said Friday: “To be clear … there is no fetal tissue in the Johnson & Johnson vaccine.”

The Catholic-affiliated Christus St. Vincent Regional Medical Center in Santa Fe will not offer people a choice of vaccines “and will be administering what we have available at the time,” Christus spokesman Arturo Delgado said in a statement. All three vaccines have proven effective in preventing hospitalizations, he said, “and our focus is on doing what’s best for our community.”

A 72-year-old Santa Fe woman said Friday she would accept any of the vaccines but hasn’t yet been invited. The woman, who asked that she not be named, said she has heart and breathing conditions, has an immune deficiency and is overweight. She said she can’t seem to get to the front of the list and that a 64-year-old friend in Santa Fe without underlying conditions has already received a shot.

“Something’s not right,” she said. “I’ll take whatever I can get. … I just want the vaccination.”

Dr. Tracie Collins, the state’s health secretary, said earlier in the week that the state had received 17,200 doses of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine. Collins said the state would distribute those doses to the 10 counties with the lowest vaccine coverage.

Health Department spokesman Matt Bieber said Santa Fe and Bernalillo counties are among the 10. Bieber said the decision on which vaccine is offered will be based on what’s available. If a patient rejects the first invitation, they will be placed back in the line of eligible recipients.

“Not at the front or the back,” Bieber said in an email.

Derksen called all three “miracle vaccines” that are highly effective in preventing complications from the disease and death.

“That’s what we ought to be focused on,” he said.